North Dakota Department of Health

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release:
April 26, 2004

For More Information, Contact:
Kathleen Mangskau, Director
Division of Tobacco Prevention and Control
North Dakota Department of Health
Phone: 701.328.3138
E-mail: kmangska@state.nd.us

Study Indicates Exposure to Short-Term Secondhand Smoke May Trigger Heart Attacks

BISMARCK, N.D. —A study published this month in the *British Medical Journal* reports that the implementation of a comprehensive local clean indoor air ordinance in Helena, Mont., may have resulted in a rapid reduction in heart attacks. The study found that hospital admissions for acute myocardial infarction (heart attack) declined by about 40 percent during the 6 months the ordinance was in effect and rebounded after the ordinance was suspended.

Dr. Terry Pechacek, associate director of science in CDC's Office on Smoking and Health, who was invited to write a commentary on the study, said, "This study is important because it focuses attention on the large body of evidence that suggests that secondhand smoke exposure causes surprisingly large increases in acute cardiovascular risk."

According to Pechacek, research indicates that nonsmokers who are exposed to secondhand smoke at typical levels may incur more than one-third of the heart disease risk of someone who smokes 20 cigarettes a day. Also, even short-term exposures – lasting as little as 30 minutes – may pose significant risks, especially for people who already have or are at special risk of heart disease. These effects are quite different from those of secondhand smoke exposure on lung cancer, where the risk increases over years of exposure. The commentary reviews recent evidence on specific mechanisms in the body that may account for these findings.

Dr. Pechacek and co-author, Stephen Babb, a CDC health education specialist, suggest in the commentary that people who have pre-existing heart disease or high risk profiles for heart disease should avoid all indoor environments that allow smoking. Family members should avoid exposing these people to secondhand smoke at home or in vehicles. On a broader level, these findings suggest that comprehensive clean indoor air policies similar to Helena's could result in an almost immediate drop in heart attacks. According to Pechacek and Babb, if such policies were implemented nationwide, they could potentially save thousands of lives each year by sharply reducing the toll of heart disease – the nation's leading killer.

-- more --

"The public health implications of these findings are significant," said State Health Officer Terry Dwelle, M.D. "The impact of secondhand smoke exposure on heart disease risk appears to be substantial and rapid, but rapidly reversible through the establishment of smoke-free environments. This study further reinforces the importance of implementing smoke-free policies as an effective way to decrease exposure to a completely preventable public health hazard."

Secondhand tobacco smoke contains at least 250 chemicals known to be toxic or carcinogenic and is responsible for more than 35,000 heart disease deaths and 3,000 lung cancer deaths in the United States each year. Both the U.S. Surgeon General and the U.S. Task Force on Community Preventive Services have concluded that the most effective method for reducing secondhand smoke exposure is the establishment of smoke-free environments.

To obtain a copy of the research article or the *Acute Cardiovascular Risks of Secondhand Smoke Exposure* commentary, visit BMJ's web site at http://bmj.bmjjournals.com/. For more information about secondhand smoke, contact Kathy Mangskau, North Dakota Department of Health, at 701.328.3138.

-- 30 --

600 E. Boulevard Ave. Dept. 301, Bismarck, North Dakota 58505-0200
Phone: 701.328.2372 **Fax: 701.328.4727** **E-mail:** health@state.nd.us